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ABSTRACT

We need a different view of teaching writing--a principle that allows us to formulate sequential learning environments with specific objectives--what the author chooses to call the Principle of Redundancy. This principle provides the student with meaningful choices about how he will learn. It states, "In any language course, parallel back-up systems should be provided for the student if the primary system fails him." Its four stipulations are: (1) instruction must be directed at the average or below-average students, not just exceptional students; (2) curricula must incorporate insights from the frontiers of discovery and change to meet the specific language needs of each school's student population; (3) parallel back-up systems must be developed in accordance with each school's demography, resources, and purpose; and (4) courses must combine meaningful, structured learning activities with meaningful student choices about how to learn. Students in the experimental Communication Skills Program at Northern Illinois University have demonstrated the benefits of the application of this principle. (Author/DD)

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Composition and the Principle of Redundancy

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Composition and the Principle of Redundancy

There are no alternatives in composition because an alternative--a choice between two incompatible things--rarely exists in our future-shocked, data-flooded world. There are not blacks and whites or rights and lefts--just in betweens and viae mediae. But there are options, because there are many different paths to language mastery.

Today I will describe some characteristics of writing instruction and conclude by outlining an integrative principle for language classes.

"Language is," according to Wayne Booth, "the centre of all intellectual development."[1] Secondary schools have the potential to nurture and to encourage language skills: But in Chicago, students' ability to comprehend what they read decreases as they advance from grade school to high school. Recent city-wide reading test scores indicate that many students unlearn reading skills, scoring less well in the eleventh grade than in the sixth grade. More depressing, twenty-two black secondary schools scored below the sagging city average. But no white secondary school underachieved so spectacularly.[2]

Now Chicago's problems are not unique. Many students--especially the blacks, Latinos, or disadvantaged--cannot control the language of one mainstream in American society: The mainstream depending upon Standard American English. Sometimes forgotten is Roman Jakobson's observation: "People usually display a narrower competence as senders of verbal messages and a wider competence as receivers."[3] And not all students can achieve equally in reading, speaking, thinking, or writing. So our task--particularly in secondary schools--is to help each student reach his optimum level of language competency.

However, we are not as successful in teaching students to read and to write as we would like. Someone critical of the frequent revolutions in composition instruction can describe our innovations as vacillations. But let me cite three key developments in teaching writing:

First, many secondary schools have practiced tracking as a device to group students homogeneously. Homogeneous grouping (sometimes called phasing) allows teachers to aim their instruction at students with similar achievement levels; a modern spinoff of tracking has been the creation of special programs for students with common linguistic characteristics. Positively, ability groupings enable English departments to develop specific curricula, to select different texts, and to experiment with teaching strategies. They represent one of the first efforts secondary schools made to individualize and to respond to a wide range of student needs. Yet tracks create a harmful "status pyramid" in the school;[4] and overt

tracking, I believe has outlived its usefulness. As tracking grew in popularity, the turn-of-the-century triad of literature-grammar-composition became an anachronism. It had been formulated for student homogeneity, not urban diversity. With this choke-hold broken, literature (whether bell-lettristic or expository) no longer must be seen as the only stimulus for writing.

As a result, writing assignments gradually have become more student-centered. Some teachers pursue the growth-through-English approach associated with the Dartmouth Conference. Some abandon a structure to follow student whims. But most teachers dabble with thematic materials, with popular concerns like ecology or filmmaking, and with ethnic-oriented materials. These are used to stimulate writing. In quest of relevance, teachers have asked students to prepare scripts, soap operas, revolutionary pamphlets, advertisements, and poems. Our increasing response to students' interests forces writing classes to consider relevant topics. Teachers have tried to find fresh ways to get their pupils to wrestle with words.

Since the early sixties in an effort to capitalize upon student interest in the relevant, secondary schools have adopted electives in English. Electives--a scheduling technique--allow students to have opportunities to receive specific instruction in types of writing. High schools usually offer electives in introductory and advanced composition, creative writing, journalism, and business writing. A student need only demonstrate initiative in selecting a class, and he can receive additional

specialized writing instruction.

These three changes--tracking, student-centered approaches, and electives--have increased the students' exposure to writing instruction. And were it not for the spectre of Chicago and the howls of our critics, we would seem to be making progress in providing opportunities to learn to write. But each of these innovations is external to the classroom. Charles Silberman has succinctly summarized how writing is taught. He writes, ". . . when writing is taught, the emphasis is almost totally on mechanics--spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, width of margins, and so on--with little attention to development, organization, style, i.e., to anything larger than a sentence."[5] Squire and Applebee report that less than twenty per cent of class time in an English class is devoted to instruction in writing. And when the instruction is provided, it occurs after the theme has been written. It is communicated to the student through negative comments in the margins of the student's paper.[6]

In defense, one can argue, the secondary school classroom itself dictates this format. Teachers in secondary schools use the lecture-discussion technique, the assigned reading, and the required assignment to give the class order and a sense of direction. The writing teacher relies on comments as the chief means of communicating with each student in a crowded classroom. But what our critics point to is our penchant for teaching not the skill of writing but summarizing "somebody's body of knowledge about writing."[7] And one university professor describes grade and high school writing experi-

ences as "public commando operations."[8] Teaching a skill is a face-to-face, time-consuming task, not practical in some of our writing classes. Many high school students taking composition in college say they have not written enough and have not worked at improving what papers they wrote.

In my opinion the result of such superficial change in teaching writing without equivalent corresponding changes in the way writing is taught produces the Lordstown Phenomenon. Named after the strik-plagued, GM factory in Ohio, this phenomenon is a blend of apathy and cynicism. The students, like the GM workers, refuse to cooperate with the system. For example, students discover that the cosmeticizing of English composition does not alter how the student is expected to learn. Or, in electives, unimportant choices and minor changes add little meaningful value to a machine-like school, still trying to stamp out students like Vega fenders. In writing class advantaged students become hostile to language instruction. Or, they want to push the class outside boundaries established by the teacher or school. The disadvantaged students seem indifferent to learning to write the language of Mainstream Standard, because they sense they are operated upon by the world. They are not operators, just victims. So students unlearn. I think the Lordstown Phenomenon explains why Jencks's research team concluded, ". . . the character of a school's output[,] depends largely on a single input, the characteristics of the entering children."[9] The environment of the writing class does not expand the student's language competence. The driving force of the center of intellectual development fizzles.

Outside of writing class are special programs and an array of supportive services. These federally- or state-funded programs tutor the students, teach them to read, provide counseling, and equip electronic and book-stuffed resource centers. These services can be used by a student--provided he takes the time and effort necessary to draw together what he needs. I have no doubt English teachers concerned with enhancing students' writing skills can make use of these services. But at present, no writing program I know of integrates the school's services with the classroom teaching of writing and reading. Everything is separate, fragmented, specialized, and aimed at blacks or Latinos, or some other group. Cooperation and interdependence seem to raise our fear of sharing teaching responsibilities.

Writing, of course, is a skill that grows from other languaging activities. To separate writing from other elements in a language matrix invites the Lordstown Phenomenon. Adolescents--because they are beginning to discover their relationship with the world--need many languaging environments, not those left to chance. They need to study within a unified, coherent network of language systems, structured to reinforce thinking, reading, speaking, and writing. We need a different view of teaching writing--a principle that allows us to formulate sequential learning environments with specific objectives. This principle cannot institutionalize false choice; it cannot teach students to unlearn. Nor can it limit how each student can enhance his languaging competence. We can achieve integrated composition instruction employing what I choose to call the Principle of Redundancy.

The term redundancy, common to electronics, refers to parallel or back-up systems, which become operative when the primary system fails. This is the sense in which the Principle of Redundancy dimensionalizes choice in developing language competency: It provides the student with meaningful choices about how he will learn. The Principle of Redundancy is not learning theory, not traditional, not Summerhillian, and not an alternative. It is a technique to optimize a student's language competency.

The Principle of Redundancy states, "In any language course, parallel back-up systems should be provided for the student if the primary system fails him." And the Principle (which has some similarity with B. F. Skinner's "reinforcement") has four stipulations:

(1) Language instruction must be directed at the average or below-average students, not just exceptional students.

(2) Language curricula must incorporate insights from the frontiers of discovery and change to meet the specific language needs of each school's student population.

(3) The parallel back-up systems must be developed in accordance with each school's demography, resources, and purposes.

(4) And finally, high school English courses must combine meaningful, structured learning activities with meaningful student choices about how to learn.

To make the Principle of Redundancy more concrete, let me briefly describe some features of an experimental program at Northern Illinois University. Students in the Communication Skills Program participate in a writing class, a speech communication class, and

a reading and study-skills class. When a student elects to enter the Program, he commits himself to nine hours of class meetings each week. Three teachers are assigned to each section enrolling a maximum of sixteen students. Each section's three teachers and sixteen students form a mini-community. The three instructors develop a curriculum for their students. The average ACT verbal for the 354 students in the program during the fall semester, 1972, is 11. Seventy per cent of the students are black, 20 per cent white, and 10 per cent Latino. Teachers jointly develop projects that apply in English, speech, and study skills class. For example, a reading assignment in speech may generate a report for writing and material for a lesson in skim-reading in the study skills class.

Let me sketch for you the parallel back-up systems provided for students in the Program. All are familiar, but they are integrated to serve each mini-community.

(1) A student who cannot work effectively with one teacher has two others to whom to turn. This has been one strength of team teaching. Conversely, if a teacher cannot work effectively with a student, he may seek the counsel of two other teachers in the mini-community. The teachers encourage regular face-to-face encounters among students and teachers; a communitas evolves from working together in related activities, which enables students to work more effectively with classmates and teachers. This first parallel system provides a series of inter-personal learning options.

(2) A student, interested in developing a specific individualized Program, may visit the Learning Center (equipped with re-

source materials and tutors) to seek advice or instruction. The Director of the Learning Center, who has released time to coordinate this service, meets each student and describes the options offered in the Learning Center. Our experience has been that many students usually want special instruction (like a mini-course in outlining) not available immediately from their teachers. Infrequently, the Director functions as a neutral party for a student disenchanted with course work in the mini-community. The major back-up systems in the Learning Center are:

(a) Individualized teaching. The student may study with the Director to master a specific skill or the Director may arrange for the student to receive instruction from a faculty member working in the Center or holding office hours there.

(b) Peer-tutoring. The student may elect to use the peer-tutoring services of the Learning Center. Eight student tutors (two bilingual-bicultural) are available during week days and four nights a weeks to provide help with programmed materials, to give advice about individual projects, or to tutor. All peer-tutors are trained and are responsible to the Director.

(c) Commercially-Prepared Materials. The student may wish to use the commercially-prepared materials in the Learning Center. A peer-tutor will check the material out for the student, work with him if the student desires assistance, and help the student determine and evaluate his progress.

(3) If a student needs additional time to develop specific skills, he can elect to receive no grade for the course at the end

of his first semester of study. He continues to work with his teachers or the other resources in the Program until he reaches a level of achievement satisfactory to his instructors.

(4) Or finally, a student may supplement his course work by participating in one of the University's peer-counseling and department-sponsored tutoring programs. Arrangements may be worked out by instructors or the Director of the Learning Center.

These four parallel back-up systems operate throughout the semester. We have discovered that extremely gifted students and students with severe problems can be channeled into one of these systems. This flexibility allows teachers to structure class meetings to provide opportunities for students to interact and explore specific issues in language. Drill work, individualized instruction, or conferences occur within this network of systems, during scheduled class meetings or after class.

It is, of course, possible for students to exhause the options in the Program. But the kinds of supportive systems we offer try to allow each student to immerse himself in one or more learning environments. Our hope is that emphasis upon the matrix of language skills will allow the student to develop his language competency. Eighty per cent of last year's students have entered their sophomore year in college.

How does the student operate in this series of systems? All systems are not dumped on students at once. Each is explained to the class in general terms, then in more detail by the teachers during individual conferences with students. The various back-up

systems are made operative only when the primary system--the classes taught by the three teachers in the mini-community--fails.

Let us visualize a student who must write a paper for English class, observing the conventions of Standard American English expected at the University. To simplify the illustration, let's assume the student has been referred to the Director of the Learning Center because the topic his mini-community will follow leaves him cold.

The student goes to the Learning Center. After a brief chat with the Director, who consults the teacher's assignment file to double-check the specific assignment made, the student talks with two peer-tutors, from whom he gets an idea for his paper. The tutors work with the student to help him clarify his ideas, to refer him to specific resources, and to provide him with continuous encouragement and feedback.

Reviewing the student's rough draft, a tutor tells the student he has not varied his sentences. Although the paper has a well-developed idea, and few mechanical errors, most sentences begin with a noun followed by a form of to be. The peer-tutors mention this to the Director, who arranges for one of the faculty from the program with office hours in the Learning Center to discuss sentence patterns with the student. The student revises the paper after he has received specific suggestions from the other teacher about the exercises in Creative Pattern Practice.[10] The Director, regularly briefed by faculty and peer-tutors, records the type of help the student received in the master log. Thus, through

back-up systems available to him, the student progresses toward appropriate skills in written expression.

In summary, our use of redundancy has four elements:

(1) Exceptional students--both the very bright and the very slow--may receive as much individual instruction as they and their teachers feel necessary. This occurs in lieu of class attendance or outside of the classroom. It provides a form of one-to-one instruction that can focus upon specific, individual interests, needs, and idiosyncrasies. Smart and slow are handled by the same systems.

(2) The average student can supplement course instruction with tutoring or resource materials designed to meet his needs.

(3) Any student, disenchanted with the teacher or the mini-community, can arrange for a parallel course and assignments through the various back-up systems. No student has opted to bypass the three instructors' curriculum, but this flexibility exists.

(4) And finally, the network of systems stimulates a variety of languaging activities. All instruction is anchored in language interaction with peers, tutors, and faculty. It is focused on developing communication skills. We believe these networks provide many ways to achieve mastery.

Without my detailing them, I'm certain you can visualize many other applications of redundancy in this experimental project. The virtue of having back-up systems is that they reassure the student; perhaps their major impact is psychological. A student knows that if something goes wrong there are systems and people who can help

him. For us the classroom is the primary system with its lectures, discussions, and reports. But parallel back-up systems of languaging environments require the student to explain himself, listen to others, evaluate their suggestions, and wrestle with concepts. A student is immersed in language use: Reading and writing, thinking and listening. with all system

Redundancy enables the Program's teachers to work individually with each student, to evaluate more projects, and to increase their own teaching's effectiveness. Redundancy demands an organized curriculum and specific assignments. If anything, redundancy blends and reinforces effectively discipline-centered and student-centered activities in writing instruction.

In conclusion, let me posit that redundancy is a principle which integrates each school's resources and maximizes each student's opportunities to enhance his language competence. For secondary schools it suggests one way to increase student immersion in languaging activities, to provide a flexible method of individualizing instruction, and to develop a frame upon which to structure a sequential language program. But each high school must develop its own network of parallel, back-up systems. These should supplement a wide range of language classes.

Obviously, redundancy cannot generate the same level of competence in all students, but it can enhance the competencies the students have. There is an African proverb that says, "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." In writing instruction, if we cling to a single approach, or a futile search

for alternatives, or iron-clad convictions that there is one way to enhance students' languaging skills, the students will suffer. Redundancy, like an elective program, opens the learning of language to a variety of innovations. To keep our students from suffering under the feet of our elephantine ideologies of traditionalism, free schools, or some other theory, we must create ways to keep the centre of our students' intellectual development on target.

Notes

[1] "English: More Than Just a Subject," Times Education Supplement, 2949 (26 November 1971), 4.

[2] Edith Herman, "City Pupils Score Below Norm in U.S.," Chicago Tribune, 2 November 1972, pp. 1, 8-9.

[3] "Verbal Communication," Scientific American, 227 (September 1972), 78.

[4] Jerome Karabel, "Open Admissions: Toward Meritocracy or Democracy?" Change, 4 (May 1972), 43.

[5] Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 176-177.

[6] High School English Instruction Today (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), pp. 121-122, 126.

[7] Leonard A. Greenbaum and Rudolf Schmerl, Course X: A Left Field Guide to Freshman English (New York: Lippincott, 1970), p. xvi.

[8] John R. Clark, "Teaching Freshman Composition," Freshman English News, 1 (Fall, 1972), 1.

[9] Mary Jo Bane and Christopher Jencks, "The Schools and Equal Opportunity," Saturday Review of Education, 55 (October 1972), 41.

[10] Mary Whitten, Creative Pattern Practice: A New Approach to Writing, (New York: Harcourt, 1966).